

Objectivity in the News

No one approaches any story with complete objectivity. As a reporter begins to research, it is likely that she will have a bias toward some aspects of the story. The goal is to set aside those presumptions and move forward with healthy skepticism.

To learn how journalists can achieve objectivity in their reporting, simply click on the titles below to expand a section and learn more.

Encouraging Diversity of Views

In many countries, a partisan press is the norm. Readers and viewers in these nations expect that a news organization will approach topics from its point of view and select subjects it covers accordingly. They know that competing news organizations may advocate from different perspectives. Opinion columns should be clearly labeled and should neither distort nor falsify.

Journalists should seek diverse voices and competing views. They should support freedom of speech. News organizations should provide forums for robust debate on issues vital to their communities. Letters to the editor and readers' comments encourage public participation. News organizations also should make every effort to keep discussions civil and discourage falsehoods or attacks on others.

Respect for the Individual

The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics says, "Minimize harm ... treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect." This principle recognizes that a responsible journalist may sometimes harm someone but should make every effort to minimize that damage. The code advises the journalist to show compassion for those who will be affected by news coverage, especially when they get attention through no fault of their own.

Crime victims, relatives of public figures, children and other vulnerable people should be treated with sensitivity.

Intrusive newsgathering can cause harm. Persistence is appropriate, but aggressive tactics cannot always be justified. Although possibly legal, making repeated phone calls, following a person, taking photographs or remaining on private property after being asked to leave may cause distress.

There can be valid reasons to report information that a news subject would prefer to keep secret. A public official may wish to keep secret an extramarital affair. But if public resources are used to support the affair, it becomes a matter of legitimate public interest.

Similarly, crime victims often prefer that their identity remain confidential, particularly in the case of sexual assault. The news media should balance the rights and interests of both victims and criminal defendants with the right of the public to be informed.

Cultural Sensitivity

Journalists should not reinforce stereotypes. They should consider carefully whether it is necessary to identify an individual by race, religion, sexual orientation or similar characteristic. Gender-neutral language often is appropriate.

Reporters should remember to be sensitive to different cultural traditions. For example, adherents of some religions forbid or discourage photographing individuals. On the other hand, “cultural values” can be a cloak for censorship.

The ethical journalist should challenge attempts to suppress the truth, whatever justification is offered.

Other parts in this series include [*The Independent Journalist*](#) and [*Being Accountable to the Public*](#).

(Adapted from an [article](#) published in the *Media Law Handbook* by the Bureau of International Information Programs. Download the complete [Media Law Handbook](#) [PDF 2.6 MB].)
